

Orchestra as a Vehicle for Social Change: Providing Opportunities and Teaching Perseverance

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MacLeod, R. B. (2014). Orchestra as a vehicle for social change: Providing opportunities and teaching perseverance. *Ala breve*, October/November 2014, 54-55.

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Abstract:

There are few things more beautiful than watching a child receive his or her first opportunity to play an instrument. Today at my lab school, the fourth grade orchestra students came to the orchestra cottage for their first lesson. At the start of the lesson, I told them, "Today, you will meet your violin." The looks of anticipation, excitement, and joy were contagious as students opened their cases for the first time. One student exclaimed, "My violin is so beautiful!"

Unfortunately for the majority of students in the United States, they will never have the opportunity to meet their first instrument. Orchestra programs are offered in fewer than 20% of public schools in the United States (Hamann, Gillespie, & Bergonzi, 2002) and the majority of these programs are located in affluent schools (Elpus & Abril, 2011). Because opportunities to learn to play a string instrument in the public schools are limited, access to string instruction is not equitable. Schools located in less affluent areas have fewer resources, directly affecting the type of opportunities offered to the students in attendance (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Costa-Giomi & Chappell, 2007; Kozol, 2005). If music education is truly for all children, then changes need to be made that encourage teachers to work with underserved populations in every area of music education.

Keywords: Music education | Orchestra | Instruction | Elementary | String instruments

*****Note: Full text of article below**

Orchestra as a Vehicle for Social Change: Providing Opportunities and Teaching Perseverance

By Rebecca MacLeod

Editor's Note: This article appears as one of a series written especially for *Ala Breve* by experts in the field of music education.

There are few things more beautiful than watching a child receive his or her first opportunity to play an instrument. Today at my lab school, the fourth grade orchestra students came to the orchestra cottage for their first lesson. At the start of the lesson, I told them, "Today, you will meet your violin." The looks of anticipation, excitement, and joy were contagious as students opened their cases for the first time. One student exclaimed, "My violin is so beautiful!"

Unfortunately for the majority of students in the United States, they will never have the opportunity to meet their first instrument. Orchestra programs are offered in fewer than 20% of public schools in the United States (Hamann, Gillespie, & Bergonzi, 2002) and the majority of these programs are located in affluent schools (Elpus & Abril, 2011). Because opportunities to learn to play a string instrument in the public schools are limited, access to string instruction is not equitable. Schools located in less affluent areas have fewer resources, directly affecting the type of opportunities offered to the students in attendance (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Costa-Giomi & Chappell, 2007; Kozol, 2005). If music education is truly for all children, then changes need to be made that encourage teachers to work with underserved populations in every area of music education.

Working successfully with underserved populations requires increased awareness of a number of variables, primarily the impact of lower income, fewer resources, English as a second language, and single parent homes. Families with lower incomes tend to be more transient and students frequently move from one school district to another. Frequent relocation impacts student attendance and parental involvement. The characteristics listed above are also common characteristics for students who are considered "at risk." At-risk students are any students who, on the basis of a variety of risk factors, are unlikely to graduate from high school and unlikely to become contributing members of society (Slavin, 1989; Taylor, Barry, & Walls, 1997). At-risk is defined by the following risk factors: low socio-economic status, single parent homes, overage for current peer group, poor attendance, little parental involvement, and educational minority (Kaufman, Bradbury, & Owings, 1992; Shaklee & Biedler, 1992). All classrooms and populations of students include students who are at-risk (Metz, 1993). However, the number of students who experience one or more of these risk factors is higher in lower income families (Kominski, Jamieson, & Martinez, 2001). This reality presents additional challenges for both students and teachers that must be overcome.

When working with students who are potentially at-risk, emphasizing the connection between hard work and success is essential. One common characteristic of at-risk students is an inappropriate association between cause and effect relationships. Internal locus of control, or the belief that one has control over the events in one's own life, is an important factor in developing perseverance skills and independence. As teachers we want our students to understand the following associations: when you do good things, good things happen to you; and when you do bad things, bad things happen to you (Madsen & Madsen, 1998). For example, if I study, I will get a good grade. However, this relationship is not well established in a young person's life when cause and effect events are unstructured and seemingly random. For instance, my mom worked hard, but we were evicted from our apartment anyway and now we have nowhere to live. Or, I behaved in class, worked hard, was respectful of my teachers, but was punished at home by an abusive guardian. Establishing the correct associations between work and reward allows students to become independent and successful. If I study, I will get a good grade. If I practice, I will play the violin better. Students, with an external locus of control, those who feel that they do not have control over their life events, may give up easily in the face of a challenge. It is our job as educators to encourage perseverance in all of our students, even those who seem to lack motivation.

Orchestra is one context through which the correct associations of cause and effect can be taught. Systematic practice generally produces a tangible positive result in the performance of the student that both teacher and student can observe. When instruction is sequenced well, the relationship between practicing/rehearsing a passage can be heard and felt almost immediately. In a beginning lesson context, improvements in performance can occur over a short period of time. Achieving small target goals accompanied with positive reinforcement assists the students in realizing how quickly they are capable of improvement. Once students realize that focusing their attention, practicing (or working), and persevering on a given task all relate to progress, they begin to realize that they have some control over their own accomplishments. As a university professor who trains undergraduate music education students to be orchestra teachers, I decided to embark on a journey to increase access to string instruction to students regardless of socio-economic status. To that end, I collaborated with an area elementary school, our local symphony orchestra, and the university to create an elementary string program

in a Title I school. The following is an account of the experiences that the elementary students had during the first year of the partnership. The primary goal of the project was to provide instrumental music instruction to underserved students, who otherwise may not ever be exposed to a string instrument. The secondary goal was to improve the elementary students' awareness of the impact of consistent work on their own achievement.

The Beginning String Program

Interested fourth grade students enrolled at an area Title I school were presented with a permission slip to take home to their guardian and instructed that if they wished to participate in the orchestra program, the permission slip must be returned to the principal by the end of the first week of school. During the first year of the program, fourteen students completed this task successfully and were enrolled in the orchestra program. The orchestra class included eleven violinists, one violist, and two cellists. The instrumentation decision was made based on the size and type of instruments that had been donated for the project.

The class met twice a weekly, for 40 minutes each meeting, during the school day for an entire school year. For their personal safety and to mitigate loss, left, or damage, students were not permitted to take the instruments home to practice for safety reasons. Therefore, all instruction and practice was completed within the class period. Students received a total of 60 group lessons over the course of the school year. Although one of the goals of the project was to help students associate hard work with success, we did not explicitly share that goal with the students. Rather, we consciously designed our instruction to include clear target goals, small sequential steps towards each goal, with positive reinforcement occurring immediately when progress was made (Duke, 2009). We also structured simple perseverance tasks for the students. For example, students were instructed to practice one to two measures of music without the teacher's assistance, and were initially given two minutes of in-class time to work on achieving the identified goal. Students were then rewarded for working towards the goal consistently during the two minutes without giving up, rather than being rewarded for accomplishing the goal itself. We hoped that this would teach the students to work towards a goal even if they were not immediately successful.

Fourth Grade Student Reflections

The following are excerpts from letters that the

fourth grade students wrote to me at the end of the year. The students were instructed to write a one-page letter that included whether they believed orchestra was important, why orchestra was important (if in fact they thought it was), and whether they should be permitted to have orchestra again during the fifth grade. To preserve anonymity, student names are not included. I did not edit the spelling or grammar of these excerpts to allow the children to have their own voice. Many of the students' writings were impacted by the fact that English is their second language.

Without prompting, a number of the fourth grade students indicated that they learned to work hard through participation in orchestra. For example, one student wrote, "Orchestra class is important because it gives students an opportunity to play an instrument. Playing a violin made me more determined to work hard." Another student expressed that learning to play string instruments was challenging and required determination:

I learned this year in orchestra that it is hard to play cello when I first started I thought it was going to be easy to play. So now I have more ideas what am I going to be when I grow up. I hope to be a orchestra teacher [sic].

Currently, string teachers and string students in the United States are predominantly white (Gillespie & Hamann, 1998), while black and Latino students are under represented in school orchestra programs (DeLorenzo, 2012; Elpus & Abril, 2011). One way for real change to occur in music teaching is through increasing the diversity of the members in our profession. If students are never given the opportunity to learn to play a string instrument, it stands to reason that they will not become orchestra teachers. Increasing access to string instruction is essential in moving our profession forward.

Many of the elementary students wrote that, orchestra made them feel special, important, or proud. "It help [sic] me understand to keep going and at the end I will be good. It made me feel good about my slaf [sic]. It help [sic] to play as a team. It Made me feel important." Another student shared, "Orchestra class helped me feel proud of myself and my work. I know [sic] have a better appreciation of music. Learning to play a musical instrument and performing made the 4th grade the best." Improved self-esteem, confidence in their own ability, and the understanding of the cause and effect relationships between work and success are all characteristics that we hope to instill in our students.

Many of the students shared wonderful perspectives regarding orchestra and its role in their lives, but two letters spoke to me on a deeper level, changing my philosophy as a teacher. One student shared that, "I think orchestra is important to me. I think orchestra is fun. It safe for us [sic]". The realization that my students' lives

were possibly unsafe and that orchestra was a potential haven, created a shift in priorities for my classroom. Creating an environment that supported the development of the whole child became a central goal for everyone involved in the program, while the ability of my students to perform at a high level became secondary. The second quote, "[Orchestra] makes you think harder. Learn to play as a group. I made me feel special," provoked a number of conversations with my university students. The final sentence, "I made me feel special," may have had one of two meanings. It is either a misspelling, "It made me feel special," or she truly meant, "I made me feel special." In other words, I am proud of myself. The teachers who worked with this student felt that she intended the second meaning.

Conclusions

The Peck Elementary String Program is now entering its sixth year. The program has grown from 14 students to include over 150 elementary students in grades 2 through 5. There are approximately 240 students enrolled in the elementary school grades 2 through 5, which means that over half of the school's student population has elected to participate in orchestra. Parent and student enthusiasm relative to participating in orchestra has prompted the local middle school to add an orchestra program. Reflections from the Peck Elementary String students reveal that orchestra is important to them, that they feel proud of themselves, and that they value hard work.

Orchestra may be one vehicle to promote social change, teach discipline and perseverance, as well as enrich the lives of all students. In order for our students to reach their full potential, we must teach them that they have control over the events in their lives, at least those that occur in our presence. Establishing clear and achievable target goals, sequencing instruction so that students are successful the majority of the time, and structuring perseverance activities where the students are rewarded regularly for effort, are all strategies that can increase student self-esteem and belief in their own abilities. Finally, introducing brief moments of failure that require the students to struggle in a structured environment, can teach them how to overcome obstacles that will surely occur in their future. Students who fail constantly will invariably give up; while those who fail occasionally and are provided with a safe opportunity to try again, will develop the life skills necessary to succeed.

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